

Depth of the self: Implicit motives and human flourishing. Introduction to the special section

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Abstract

This special section is the outcome of a conference organized in Würzburg, as part of the interdisciplinary research project Motivational and Volitional Processes of Human Integration: Philosophical and Psychological Approaches to Human Flourishing (2018–2021). The goal of the project was to connect (philosophical) perspectives on flourishing to empirical research that suggests that implicit motives play an important role in who we are and what we do and decide. One main aim was to find a middle ground between two extremes that conceptualize implicit motives either as recalcitrant states that hamper flourishing, or as reflecting who we really are, much more than our explicit motives. We propose that both implicit and explicit motives are crucial to flourishing. The articles in this special section bring up other important questions as well. First of all, what is the role of the external world? It seems to be crucial for being a self, but it may also hamper flourishing. And second, how should the relationship between the self as basic subjectivity, and the self with certain values, desires, and intentions be understood?

Keywords

explicit motives, flourishing, implicit motives, integration, self

This special section on the depth of the self and, more specifically, on the relationship between implicit motives and human flourishing, is the outcome of a conference with the

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same title that took place in August 2019 in Würzburg, Germany. The conference was organized as part of the interdisciplinary research project *Motivational and Volitional Processes of Human Integration: Philosophical and Psychological Approaches to Human Flourishing* (2018–2021). The central aim of the project, led by Prof. Brüntrup from the Munich School of Philosophy and Prof. Kehr from the Technical University of Munich and funded by the Templeton Religion Trust, was to connect (philosophical) perspectives on flourishing to empirical research that suggests that implicit motives play an important role in who we are and what we do and decide.

Prima facie, it seems that if implicit motives—roughly, motives we are not aware of—influence what we do and who we are, this forms a challenge to our possibility of leading flourishing lives. After all, proper agency involves more than simply the ability to act; it requires some kind of psychological organization and regulation (see, e.g., Frankfurt, 1988; Korsgaard, 2008). Flourishing agents, then, should, as a minimum, have developed a view of the good life and be able to bring their motives, desires, and actions in line with this view. Implicit motives seem to hamper such integration. An example is implicit bias: even though an agent claims to value egalitarianism, they may still be unconsciously influenced by the gender, race, or disability of the person they encounter (see, e.g., Beeghly & Madva, 2020; Brownstein & Saul, 2016, for discussion). Motivational problems are another example: even though a person may think they chose a job they enjoy and find worthwhile, they still may suffer from lack of motivation and have a hard time understanding why this is the case (e.g., Brunstein et al., 1998; Kehr, 2004).

Implicit motives, then, seem to be in some sense alien to us, and mainly disrupt our ability to act on our consciously held motives and values. Additionally, researchers suggest that implicit states are difficult to change and develop early in life; we seem to be more or less “stuck” with them, whether we like them or not (e.g., Brunstein, 2018). If this is true, implicit states would form an obstacle to integration and flourishing; they diminish our possibility to direct our lives in ways we find valuable.

Conversely, however, instead of discarding implicit motives as recalcitrant states that we should try to suppress or get rid of as much as possible, we may also think that implicit beliefs, desires, and motives are in fact more intimately connected to who we really are. They might reflect what we truly want, what kind of person we really are, and may play an important role in intrinsic motivation, flow experiences, and personality development (e.g., Baumann et al., 2010; Kehr, 2004). Explicit states, on the other hand, might to a large extent reflect expectations of others and social norms, instead of the kind of person we really are and want to be (Kehr, 2004). Understanding our implicit motives, then, would mean discovering who we actually are.

These two approaches on the relationship between implicit motives and flourishing represent different perspectives on the self and what it means for a self to flourish. One of the starting points of the research project and conference was that in order to deepen our understanding of these lines of reasoning, the underlying philosophies need to be made explicit. Two (seemingly) opposing views, often discussed under the label of “authenticity” throughout the history of philosophy, are of crucial importance: authenticity is either understood as discovering who you really are (e.g., Rousseau, 1770/1957),

or about realizing and shaping the person you want to be (e.g., Korsgaard, 2008; Sartre, 1943/1969; see Taylor, 1992, for discussion).

One of the central aims in our project was to critically address this, in our eyes, false dichotomy. Our overarching thesis was that we should understand the self as organismic; it has an internal tendency to grow and integrate. In such a view, interaction between implicit and explicit processes is of central importance. This view is related to Carl Rogers' (1961) work in psychology, and can be found in the philosophy of Whitehead (1929). In line with this, we maintain that understanding flourishing involves reflecting on conceptual and normative issues, but also requires answering empirical questions. It is therefore crucial to bring together philosophical, psychological, and neuroscientific approaches on the self, integration, and flourishing. We hope that this special section will be an important step in doing so, and will facilitate continued exchange between these different approaches.

Interestingly, as will become clear from the articles that make up this special section, other issues have surfaced while reflecting on how to make sense of the (flourishing) self in relation to implicit and explicit states and processes. Perhaps most importantly, the papers in the special section make clear that the question of the self is not just about explicit and implicit states and processes within the boundaries of the embodied agent. They make clear that we also need to reflect on the relationship between the "inner" and "outer," that is, the world in which we live, in order to understand the self and what it means to flourish. Is external influence detrimental to the development and understanding of the self, or is it in fact crucial, that is, is the self inherently relational? As Northoff and Smith (2023) argue, the self should not be understood as an internal phenomenon, but as neuro-ecological. In a similar vein, Asma (2023) sets forth an alternative perspective on implicit motives: instead of seeing them as internal objects, she argues that they are generic descriptions of specific ends an agent may act for. This approach paves the way for a relational account of the self as well, in which how the agent responds in certain contexts, either implicitly or explicitly, is crucial for making sense of who they are and whether they can be seen as a flourishing agent. Malekzad et al. (2023), however, make clear that this requires careful reflection. They discuss several strands of research that suggests that acting for external goals might be detrimental for well-being and human functioning. Clearly, the relationship between self and world in relation to flourishing needs to be investigated in more detail.

This brings us to another question that surfaces when comparing the articles in this special section: how should the relationship between the self as basic subjectivity, that is, "what it is like" (e.g., Nagel, 1974), prereflective self-consciousness (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2019), or even the more fundamental layer of self Northoff and Smith (2023) target, and the self with certain values, desires, and intentions be understood? Even if the basic subjective self is inherently neuro-ecological, when it comes to flourishing, our connections with the world can be either supportive of or detrimental. Accordingly, an important question is how to distinguish between the two, that is, which kinds of external influences, or what kind of world, enhances flourishing, and which diminishes it?

Let's now turn to briefly introducing each of the various contributions that jointly compose this special section.

Asma—On the nature of implicit motives

In research on implicit motives, for example following David McClelland's (e.g., McClelland, 1987) influential research project on human motivation, it is often assumed that implicit motives are internal psychological states, hidden from view, that bring about certain expressions, for example behaviors, feelings, or thoughts, which can be measured through implicit measures like the Picture Story Exercise (PSE). The PSE is meant to avoid (a) merely reasoning backward from expressions to cause, and (b) being unable to distinguish between different possible interpretations of an agent's conduct.

But can implicit motives really be understood as internal psychological states? And can interpretation be avoided? Asma (2023) argues that the answer to both questions is "no." In the first part of the article, she critically reflects on the definition that is typically adopted in the literature, that an implicit motive is nonconscious concern, need, or disposition that drives, energizes, directs, and selects behavior toward the attainment of certain classes of goals, incentives, or outcomes. This definition is circular, which means that either the motive or the motivated behavior needs to be defined independently of the other. After rejecting some possible ways to define the implicit motive in terms of a certain kind of psychological state the agent has no introspective access to, Asma (2023) argues that the implicit motives that McClelland and others in the field distinguish—the power, achievement, and affiliation motive—have to be understood in terms of that on the basis of which an implicit motive is ascribed to the agent: the behavior toward the attainment of certain classes of goals, incentives, or outcomes.

In line with this, Asma (2023) argues (inspired by Anscombean action theory, e.g., Anscombe, 1963) that implicit motives should be understood as generic descriptions, for example, power, under which specific ends—for example, impressing others—an agent may act for fall. An agent acts for an implicit motive if their action can be described in a certain way on a higher level, and they do not realize this. Implicit motives, then, are not hidden from view because they are deeply buried in the agent's mind, but because it is a matter of seeing an agent's (or one's own) conduct in a certain light that involves interpretation. When it comes to implicit motives, then, interpretation cannot be avoided.

Malekzad et al.—Not self-aware? Psychological antecedents and consequences of alienating from one's actual motives, emotions, and goals

In their contribution to this special section, Malekzad et al. (2023) discuss empirical findings on the importance of self-awareness—of being aware of motives, emotions, and goals, for example—for human flourishing, motivation, and well-being. In order to analyze the role of self-awareness, they use a dual-processing approach, according to which the mind consists of two processes, implicit and explicit. This approach is supported by psychological research, which indeed suggests that implicit and explicit motives represent two distinct domains and systems of behavioral regulation. As a result, discrepancies between these two processes can be measured through implicit and explicit assessments of the same construct, and studies can show what happens if these implicit and explicit processes are either in line or out of line.

In line with the view that flourishing requires integration, findings show that discrepancies typically have deleterious consequences, while harmony is related to flow and higher levels of well-being and psychological health. Additionally, research findings suggest that awareness of implicit motives, applying metamotivational strategies, instructing people to focus on their internal states like affect or goals, and mindfulness can reduce discrepancies. Mindfulness, for example, increases the likelihood of processing different aspects of emotions, which may lead to a decrease in dissociation between implicit and explicit affect. Another important line of research Malekzad et al. (2023) discuss is the importance of finding a healthy balance in goals between personal choice and external control, and to avoid pursuing goals that are not integrated with the self. Also here, awareness is of crucial importance: research suggests that individuals often do not consciously recognize that a goal that is discrepant with underlying, implicit preferences, that is, that the individual is currently not aware of, is imposed on them. Indeed, some individuals are more prone to misremember goals as self-chosen, which may also have negative effects on psychological functioning and well-being.

All in all, they conclude from their literature review that self-awareness and harmony between implicit and explicit processes is of crucial importance for human flourishing, although they do emphasize that further research is needed to identify the crucial factors.

Northoff and Smith—The subjectivity of self and its ontology: From the world–brain relation to the point of view in the world

Northoff and Smith (2023) aim to reconcile and connect the subjective perspective on self, which typically takes center stage in the philosophy of mind and phenomenology, with objective approaches to self, that is, the investigation of neural correlates associated with self. Their approach to bridging the gap between the two is to bring in three key concepts: the temporo-spatial relation between world and brain, neuro-ecological self, and point of view. Crucially, they do not take the self as a point of departure for characterizing its role and place in the world, but instead describe the world in temporo-spatial and ontological terms, which then serves as a basis for exploring the ontological similarities between the world and self.

In the first part of the article, Northoff and Smith (2023) use research on the brain's spontaneous activity, the effects of traumatic life events, and the relationship between scale-free features of world and brain to argue for three claims. First of all, research shows that the brain's scale-free activity is related to mental phenomena such as the self and consciousness. They seem to operate across different time scales by integrating and nesting them within each other. Secondly, early significant life events shape the brain's resting state and task-related activity in adulthood, which means that there is a world–brain relation on several layers, which in turn shapes the self in a neuro-ecological and scale-free way, that is, across different time scales. Finally, research on scale-free activity in world and brain, for example in the case of music, shows that the degree of matching of the scale-free properties strongly shape one's mental features, for example feeling of

pleasure and the sense of self. Together, these findings suggest that the world–brain relation is scale-free and characterized by temporal nestedness, which in turn may be critical in shaping and constituting the intrinsically neuro-ecological and scale-free self.

The next step is to connect these neurological insights on the relations between brain, world, and self to world-based subjectivity. Here, point of view plays a crucial role. Point of view, as Northoff and Smith (2023) conceptualize it, refers to the subject and mental life as well as to something beyond it: the world with its ecological features in which it is situated. As a result, point of view should be understood in ecological and temporospatial features as well, and constitutes an intrinsic, necessary connection between the world in which it is situated and the brain. Point of view, then, forms the basis of subjectivity within the world. Additionally, it implies that the neuro-ecological self and its point of view are not only intrinsically relational, which entails a relational ontology, but are also dynamic and intrinsically temporal.

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